Killing Machines

By

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Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis is to address the question of whether the actions a player performs within video games can be considered to matter in a moral sense. Rather than basing my approach upon the possible influence that violent behaviour in video games may have upon the player's behaviour, my focus in this thesis is restricted to considering the actions the player takes within the game entirely on their own merits, centring around the idea that although the situation encountered within a simulation is not real, the actions the player performs can still be considered as meaningful. I first consider the responses that the normative theories of Consequentialism, Deontology and Virtue Ethics have to actions taken within video games. Having established that the first two theories are primarily concerned with entities that possess moral standing, I turn to examining the reasons why video-game entities appear to lack this moral standing. To do this, I consider the status of video-game entities in light of the fact they are not real, before turning to an examination of the player ceding responsibility for their moral decisions to the expectations of the game-world. I conclude from this examination that there is little ability to justify classifying video-game entities as entities deserving of moral standing on their own merits. Finally, I examine the reasons based in virtue ethics as to why a player should treat video-game entities as if they did have moral standing, concluding that a player is able to use the game as an opportunity to practice their own sense of morality.

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To the many games I have played that have prompted me to stop and wonder whether what I was doing was right. Without the anguish they instilled in me, this thesis would never have existed.

Contents

Introduction

The intention of my thesis is to determine whether the actions players take within a video game have moral weight when considered purely as acts in themselves, and if so, how they should be interpreted. My focus is upon the in-game actions themselves, and as such, I will not be discussing the possibility of in-game actions leading to actions being taken separately in the real world, such as the possibility of violent acts in games influencing players to commit violent acts in the real world.[1] I will, however, make the argument that there is not a sharp boundary between a simulated world and the real world when it comes to moral considerations and culpability.

The overall structure of my thesis is to first look at various normative theories of ethics and how they can be applied to the actions of a player within a video game. Secondly, I will look at the reasons why these normative theories seem to indicate that actions performed in simulation do not matter in a moral sense. Thirdly, I will explore reasons based upon virtue ethics as to why the actions the player takes can matter in a moral sense. My argument is that while the targets of the player's actions within a simulation are not real, the player is still committing real acts by performing them, and these actions do matter in a moral sense. I believe that the issue is less about whether or not a video-game entity possesses the necessity for moral consideration, but rather that something has gone wrong with our moral system if we fail to apply such consideration anyway.

Additional Issues

Before moving on, there are a number of other issues within video games that I have chosen not to focus on, including theft, racism, sexism, bullying, and cheating. I have chosen to exclude theft because it is difficult to define whether something in a game counts as theft when the item being stolen was placed in the game specifically for the benefit of the player; that is, nothing in the game uses or owns it in any meaningful way. If the item being 'stolen' does not belong to the entities that happen to be assigned to it, and would not exist within the game were it not expected that the player would take it, then is it actually theft? The objection of a non-player character (NPC) to the player taking the item is in most cases not sufficiently dissimilar to a normal 'enemy' reaction to warrant further discussion beyond

[1] I will make brief mention of the literature on this topic in the Consequentialism section.

what I will cover regarding enemy actions in the sections dealing with killing. Additionally, many games, such as the Pokémon franchise, have no form of censure applied to the player for rifling through containers within the homes of NPC's, either from the mechanics of the game or from the NPC's themselves. While it could be argued that this is condoning an act which would be regarded as criminal in the real world, there is nothing to suggest that you are doing more than scavenging unwanted items, due to the lack of reaction. While there are interesting questions that the issue of theft in games could raise, this thesis must draw the line somewhere, and I believe it to be more useful to focus on issues of direct harm as previously indicated.

Racism and sexism are definitely problems within the real world, and it is possible to compile a list of acts that would be deemed racist or sexist within video games, but many of these can be subsumed under the categories of killing or torture. The difference with racist or sexist acts is primarily one of motivation, particularly a hostile reaction to a particular group; the acts themselves are indistinguishable from those motivated by other means once motivation has been provided. Sexism in particular is hard to restrict to the game world in this way, as most examples of sexism within modern video games exist on the basis of external interpretation; that is, there is no inherent difference between the genders in terms of gameplay, but the visual portrayal of characters as seen by the player could be regarded as sexist. Dressing a female character in a very revealing outfit is one example, as it has no effect on the mechanics of the game or the performance of the characters within it, but external to the game it could be argued as a case of objectifying women. I will be discussing the responsibilities of the designers in terms of the contents of their games as part of the sections on agency, but this will be focused primarily on those actions the player is permitted or encouraged to perform rather than things already present within the game world.

Like sexism, racism in video games is largely a matter of external perspective, where the portrayal of a particular real-world race can be seen as offensive by those observing or playing the game. Alternately, there can be instances where a racial group is specifically portrayed as 'the enemy' within the game, whether deliberately defined or in the sense of the enemies the player encounters all adhering to a particular racial grouping. However, even when games do not feature real-world races, games that define a particular type of sentient creature as 'the enemy' are still committing the same kind of action; it is just less transparent. Because I am primarily concerned with those issues where the ramifications can be examined while staying largely within the game world, I will not discuss the issues of racism and

sexism within my thesis. However, the interested reader may direct their attention to the works of others who have made these topics their focus, such as Sharon(1997), Brock (2011), and Schleiner (2001).

Bullying is a person-versus-person activity, the physical acts of which fall largely within the context of torture. Verbal and other forms of psychological abuse are largely directed by players towards other players; it is beyond the level of current technology for a computer-created entity to have sufficient self-awareness to be capable of being bullied in a meaningful way. To add further complications, computer entities are incapable of disobeying their inherent instructions, and thus cannot be pressured into doing something they do not 'wish' to do, because what they are told to do *is* what they 'wish' to do. Player-versus-player bullying in the psychological sense is, like racism and sexism, something that occurs largely outside the mechanical framework of the game, rather than something inherent to the game mechanics. There are exceptions, such as the activity known among gamers as 'griefing', where deliberate efforts to sabotage the activities of other players are made, but the majority of actions that would be defined as bullying could equally take place on message-board websites and the game is merely used as a vehicle for an unrelated activity. The focus of my thesis is on those actions taken by the player in isolation from other players; how they act if they are the only 'real' person within the game world, and as such I will be leaving aside cases of bullying within video games.

Finally, cheating in video games is largely an issue of fair play, where the player is no longer playing by the established rules but instead ignoring or bypassing them to give themselves an advantage. Cheating applies in sporting events and examinations within the real world, but the problem is that it could also apply to a vast array of other situations if it is societal rules that are considered to be the ones being broken to gain advantage. In this sense, threatening someone with a weapon in order to take an item without paying for it would be 'cheating' just as much as short changing that person would be, as the agent would be breaking the accepted rules of how such a transaction should take place in either instance. The fact that the first method carries with it the threat of violence is not sufficient to exclude it from being labelled as cheating, as the agent is still breaking the 'rules' by performing the act. Because of the nebulous nature of cheating as an act, I will be leaving it largely unexamined, except where it relates to the idea of a player removing themselves from the need to consider others via rendering themselves invulnerable to reciprocation, as touched upon in the deontological section above.

Part One – Ethical Responses

Normative Theories

In terms of applying ethical theories to determine the morality of actions in a video game universe, there are several normative approaches to consider. I will be employing the three dominant theories: consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethics. The application of these three different approaches to the problem leads to the player's actions being interpreted to possess varying levels of moral weight, and can result in entirely different categorisations of permissible and non-permissible acts. The first part of my thesis consists of a short introduction regarding the three ethical theories I will be employing. By considering video-game acts in light of these three approaches, I will use the second part of my thesis to explore whether acts taken by the player within a video game are seen as unimportant in a moral sense and the reasons why this may be so. As the third part to my thesis, I will then examine reasons why we may wish to or need to apply further consideration to those acts.

Consequentialism

The first of these normative approaches, consequentialism, is based upon the idea that it is the effects that a person's actions produce that determines the morality of the action. Further, it is the view that whatever values are adopted by an individual or institution, the proper response to those values is to promote them; agents should perform whatever action will promote that value (Pettit 1993 p.231). Possible actions are therefore rated by the consequentialist in regards to the degree of likelihood those actions have of promoting the selected value (Pettit 1993 p.232); although a distinction is made between 'act' consequentialism, which holds that every action must accord with promoting that value, and 'rule' consequentialism, in which the agent must act in accordance with rules of conduct that are most conducive to promoting that value (Graham 2004 p.136). The key idea is that the 'wrongness' of an action is determined by the consequences that transpired as a result of the action, while the actual motives the agent had in performing the action are at best only tangentially relevant. Simplistically, an action that makes things better is good, and an action which makes things worse is bad, and as such the intentions of the agent are relevant only in the fact that the intention to produce good consequences is more likely to produce good consequences of some kind than the intention to produce bad consequences would be (Baggini 2007 p.56). There are several forms of consequentialism, most notably the several variations of utilitarianism, each of which focuses on a different idea of what the values to be

promoted by consequentialist behaviour should be. Hedonistic utilitarianism, for example, focuses on producing the greatest happiness in the greatest number of people, while welfare utilitarianism focuses on promoting the well-being or flourishing of the greatest numbers of people (Baggini 2007 p.57-8). Rather than attempting to analyse these variations individually, for the purposes of my thesis I will be adopting a pluralistic approach to consequentialism that assumes the value being sought is some combination of happiness, wellbeing and autonomy for the individuals involved. The focus of my thesis is not on the details of normative ethics, but rather upon a consideration of video games, so I deem this generalised approach to be sufficient for my purposes.

A consequentialist approach to video game actions can be applied in at least two different ways. The most common approach in research on the topic is whether violent actions within video games influence the player to commit increased acts of violence in the real world; a review of the literature conducted in 2001 indicated a correlation between participation in violent video games and heightened aggression on the part of the player, with the suggestion of a causal link between such activity and decreased pro-social behaviour in the real world (Anderson and Bushman 2001). In contrast, a 2007 review that aimed to correct for publication bias found no evidence to support the hypothesis that video game violence leads to aggressive behaviour (Ferguson 2007). Both of these conclusions focus on the effect violent behaviour in games has on behaviour in the real world; as such, the acts the player takes within the game are considered only in light of the negative consequences they might have on real-world behaviour, and it is the real-world behaviour that possesses moral weight. This approach to a consequentialist perspective is not the focus of my thesis, but it does highlight some of the difficulties inherent in attempting to consider the morality of in-game acts purely on the basis of their activity within the game. From this perspective, a video game act that does not lead to a change in real-world behaviour has no moral weight, regardless of what the action actually is, simply because there are no real-world consequences – nobody in the real world is harmed as a result of performing the act[2]. If the actions taken with a video game do lead to heightened aggression, it is still the real-world aggressive act that causes the negative consequences rather than the act within the game; a distinction recognisable via the realisation that even heightened aggression only makes it more likely to make a decision with negative consequences, but does not itself necessarily have to be acted

[2] It could be argued that the player themselves is a real person who may suffer harm as a result of playing the game, such as experiencing depression upon losing, but this is not something that can be understood within consequentialism.

upon. That is, under this application of consequentialism, the personal intentions and aggressive tendencies of the agent have no bearing on whether or not the act they actually performed in the game could be classified as moral or not; only the results of the act itself determine its nature. Because in-game violent acts are effectively twice removed from the action that results in negative consequences, it is difficult to justify labelling an in-game act as being directly moral or immoral when interpreted in terms of real-world consequences. However, as noted, this approach is not a consideration of the actions performed by the player within the game itself. My interest lies in the consideration of whether there is in fact some sense where the player's in-game actions can have moral weight regardless of their link to real-world repercussions, and as such I must take a slightly different approach to the application of consequentialist theories.

This second approach to considering video-game actions in a consequentialist sense is the consideration of whether the actions have negative consequences against the entities within the video game, specifically the computer-generated 'creatures' controlled via artificial intelligence programs. Essentially, this is the view that performing an aggressive or violent act against a video-game entity causes harm to that entity, and therefore carries negative consequences. It is the view that in-game consequences for the entities of the game provide reason for avoiding actions which will result in negative consequences towards them. The objection to this idea is that because the computer-generated and controlled entities targeted by video-game players cannot actually suffer harm, they are not subject to moral consideration. I will be exploring this topic in more detail in the section on the unreality of video-game entities, and discussing the reason why such a view may be problematic in the third part of my thesis.

Deontology

The second normative approach that can be applied to video-game actions is the deontological approach. Deontological morality is concerned with duties and principles, requiring moral agents to behave in certain ways not directly defined by considerations of the actual outcome. For a deontologist, duty must be the source of moral action, rather than feelings of happiness or satisfaction, and regardless of whether the action serves the 'greater good' of the agent or community (Baggini 2007 p.64). Deontology is in essence the view that there are certain types of acts which are wrong in themselves, and are thus morally unacceptable regardless of the results which they may be used to achieve (Davis 1993 p.205). To act rightly, an agent must adhere to rules or constraints that require the agent to refrain

from performing actions that can be known beforehand to be wrong, and, importantly, even if their refusal can be known to result in greater harm than that produced by performing the forbidden action (Davis 1993 p.206). The actions that are wrong are wrong because of the kinds of actions that they are, and not because of their outcomes. The actual specifics of what are regarded as the duties of the agent vary between specific deontological theories, so for the purposes of my thesis, I will be considering Kantian deontology and divine command theory as the two principle systems.

The Kantian deontological approach revolves around the question of what principles can be adopted by a number of agents such that nothing specific must be assumed about their desires or social relations, with the assumption that nothing should be a moral principle if it cannot be a principle for all. This Categorical Imperative can be summed up with the demand that agents should only act on maxims such that they can will said maxim should be universal law (Kant 1785 p.274). A standard example would be the idea of an agent who might adopt the maxim of promising falsely; should this maxim become universal, and all promises were made falsely, the act of making a promise would lose all meaning, and so a making a false promise would also cease to be a meaningful action. The agent could not, therefore, universalise their maxim and so should not act upon it. A variation on this system introduces the demand that agents treat humanity in themselves and in other persons as an ends rather than ever just as a means. Rather than checking to see if all could adopt the same maxim, it demands that agents leave intact the capacities of other agents to act according to their own maxims (O'Neill 1993 p.178), and accordingly an act is wrong in the Kantian sense if it removes an agent's ability to dissent or consent to something that involves them (O'Neill 1993 p.179).

Both of these concepts run into difficulties when applied to a video-game world. In the vast majority of video games, there is a form of competitiveness; the player is in some way competing against a computer entity, whether indirectly be attempting to be the first to a goal, or directly such as games involving direct combat. Due to this competitiveness, it is necessary for the player and the computer entities within the game to adhere to approximately the same rules. Some modifications to the rules in terms of a handicap are considered acceptable due to the limitations of artificial intelligence, but overt differences in rules would result in imbalance and a sense of foul play. Generally, the player and the game entities (taken as a collective, with the game itself acting as the other 'player') are advantaged and disadvantaged in equivalent if not necessarily identical ways. Essentially, this means that the

player is willing to follow the rules of the game-world with the understanding that the computer entities will follow them as well; they would not wish to play a game where they could break the rules if the computer entities were able to respond in the same way. The player is not only permitted, but actively encouraged to commit acts against the computer entities so long as those entities are free to commit similar acts against the player. So far, this is not incompatible with the Categorical imperative, but there is a complication. One of the assumptions of Kantian deontology is that agents are mutually vulnerable; that is, they are not self-sufficient in their needs and are in at least some sense dependent upon other agents to fulfil them (O'Neill 1993 p.178). Specifically, there is a sense in which every agent is just as susceptible to being harmed by other agents as any other; this links to the test for the universalizability of maxims by assuming that an immoral maxim being universalised would harm the proponent. The problem is that within the game world player usually has access to the ability to render themselves relatively invulnerable, whether through skill or the acquisition of protections, while the computer entities are not similarly capable of protecting themselves in the same way. In other words, the player can will it to be a universal rule that anyone can kill each other and take their stuff, secure in the knowledge that although other entities are free to challenge them, the ability of those entities to harm the player is unequal to the task.

This of course runs into the second consideration of Kantian deontology; the player should not be free to treat the entities he encounters in the game merely as a means towards collecting further power and resources. But what would it mean to treat a computer entity as an end in itself? As with consequentialism, the fact that computer entities are not real, feeling beings seems to imply that they are not subject to moral consideration, and can in fact be treated as means to ends without objection. An objection to this latter view can be found through the Kantian idea that people should act through a sense of duty and a good will, where the motives behind the action can be taken as indications of whether it is good or bad. From this, there are two alternatives; either the player is performing an action with the intent to cause harm and is therefore morally culpable, or they are intending no such thing and do not consider their actions in such terms on the basis that the entity they are acting against is not real. Once again, I will be exploring this topic more fully in the sections on the unreal nature of video games.

A second deontological approach which can be readily applied to video-game worlds is divine command theory. Divine command theory, as a form of deontology, is once again

concerned with certain principles being inviolable. However, in this instance the principles are regarded as being sourced in an authority, specifically a deity, and moral action is therefore adhering to the direction of that authority (Berg 1993 p.525). As pointed out by Plato in his Euthyphro, divine command theory does carry with it the problem of whether an action demanded by a deity is good because the deity demands it, or whether the deity demands it because it is the good thing to do (10b-11c). It is this former interpretation that is of interest in regards to video games, because in that interpretation any action, however it might be regarded by the community, would be a moral action provided it adhered to the prescription of the deity's authority.

Because the virtual world of a video-game is a self-contained universe with different rules than that of the real world, it is possible to think of the developer or designers of the game as being akin to a deity. The interesting thing about this approach is that it means that within the game world, whatever the designer dictates is a morally required or permissible action is just that, with the converse also being true. Thus, it allows a fresh interpretation of the idea of morality as derived from a deity, independent of the existence of a real-world deity. In a game-world, the developers or administrators are responsible for deciding how the game runs, what actions are possible, and most importantly what rewards and punishments there are for certain actions. In this sense, moral imperatives come from the creators and administrators of the game world; what they consider to be good or evil is reflected in the game world itself. This aspect is most noticeable in games with a quantified moral choice system, where the player will gain or lose some form of morality points depending upon their actions, based upon whether or not they agree with the moral code the developers expect the player to follow. However, almost any game where there is some form of competitiveness can be regarded as containing a moral code dictated by the developers, whether it is something as simple as 'don't cheat', i.e. follow the rules the game gives the player, or something more loaded such as 'you must kill these entities'.

The developers, presumably, get their own personal moral interpretations from some external source, whether philosophy, indoctrination or revelation, and it is not disputed that there is a connection to real-world ethics arising from this aspect. However, in a video game, the moral decisions the player makes and is able to make are dictated directly by a recognisable source, namely the developers, and this may be implemented independently from real-world moral systems. That is, the developer may believe an action to be wrong, were it applied to a real-world situation, but can still develop the game-world in such a way that the action would be

'right' for the player to perform. What then does that mean for the concept of right and wrong in a virtual world? In a game about warfare, killing 'enemy' soldiers is not only condoned, it is an intrinsic part of how the game operates. The player is given no choice but to kill the enemies, who are, in the context of the game, only attempting to prevent the player completing their objective. But, and this is the important part, the player cannot in this sense be said to be doing wrong, as they are adhering to the directions of the designers of the game. On a similar note, the entities placed within video games are placed there for the specific purpose of being used by the player, and are fulfilling their purpose by being so used. By playing the game, the player is arguably agreeing to abide by the moral landscape presented to them by the game world. I will explore these ideas further in the second section of my thesis, within the subsection on moral agency.

Virtue Ethics

The third normative theory, virtue ethics, centres on asking the question of what a virtuous person would do in various situations. That is, rather than focusing on acting for the sake of the 'good', or through duty, law or reason providing rules of action, the theory holds virtue as paramount in importance (Blackburn 2008 p.381). Virtue is classified as a character trait worthy of admiration, one which, in a moral way, or in specific circumstances, renders its possessor better compared to someone who lacks that virtue (Blackburn 2008 p.381). Virtue theory attempts to focus on 'good' as a predicative rather than an attributive; rather than saying 'that cake is good', and meaning 'I like that cake', it instead uses 'good' to indicate a claim about the world, as in the case of 'aspirin is a good painkiller' (Graham 2004 p.56). In other words, the 'good' is good for something, rather than simply being good or bad in its own right. Aristotle, one of the early proponents of virtue ethics in the Western tradition, thought that just as the good of the thing resides in the function for sculptors and eyes and all other things that possess a function, so to must humans have a 'good' which results from fulfilling their function as a human. In other words, there are certain virtues which make an individual good at being a soldier or craftsman, so he believed there must be such thing as qualities which make someone good as a human. Specifically, he thought that the good of a human was activity of the soul implying a rational principle; a good person is someone who performs that function well. Human good, then, is activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there is more than one virtue, then it is activity in accordance with the best of those virtues (Aristotle 1.7). A good person, therefore, is one who exhibits the features of human excellence, specifically those features regarded as virtuous. As virtuous acts are by

nature pleasant, the virtuous person receives pleasure in their own life by adhering to virtue, and can thereby achieve happiness and wellbeing, while it cannot be said that someone who does not enjoy acting justly is even good (1.8).

What does this mean in terms of video game worlds? Unlike the previously mentioned normative approaches, virtue ethics is concerned with the character of the player more than it is with the actions they are taking, and so it avoids the issue of the simulated world of the game being isolated from the real world. Instead, the character of the player is tested via the simulation in almost the same way as if they were acting in real life. There are at least two ways to apply virtue ethics to gameplay; the first is to consider whether the player is virtuous in terms of being a good player of the game, just as a soldier is good in terms of being good at soldiering, and the second is whether the player is being a virtuous person by general standards of virtue – that they are good at being a human. Both of these can also be considered to feed back in the opposite direction; that the actions the player takes within the game can alter whether or not the player is a virtuous person, by means of habituation of character. Aristotle thought that the virtues are obtained by first exercising them (2.1); that is, the character traits associated with virtue are developed by habituation, and that the virtues are fixed within people via the practice of right actions (Nahmias 2010 p.164). The actions the player takes in becoming a 'good' player of the game may not necessarily be in agreement with obtaining and habituating those virtues that develop the player as a human being. The two applications stand in conflict with each other, in this sense, and this is why it may be necessary to examine the character of a 'good' player, as compared to what might be regarded as the character of a 'good' human. It is to this comparison that I will return in Part 3 of my thesis.

Kinds of acts

In order to form a proper comparison between morality in the real world and morality in the virtual world, it is necessary to define points of commonality between the two. In terms of morality, there are a number of acts we can perform that are almost universally agreed to be at the very least morally questionable, if not outright evil. To provide the points of comparison, I am choosing to focus upon those acts which are capable of being performed both in the real world and at least analogously in the virtual world of a video game. By doing so, I hope to highlight the points of direct equivalence, but more importantly also those points where there is a difference between what is permissible in the virtual world compared to the

real world. I have chosen those acts which would be generally regarded as 'bad' or 'evil' as a focus for investigation because there appears to be less disagreement between ethical theories regarding the kinds of acts we should not do, than there is regarding the kinds of acts we should. However, I will continue to use the term 'morally questionable' in those cases where there is justifiable disagreement. By examining the rationale behind the differing judgements of similar acts depending on whether they are 'virtual' or 'real, I intend to explore the idea of whether it is appropriate to treat such acts differently depending upon the setting in which they are performed, or whether there is indeed some sense in which an action performed within a simulated world is morally significant.

The definition for a morally questionable act that I am using is an act that would not be called 'good' by most ethical frameworks, but which is not necessarily 'evil'. Specifically, it is an act that by its nature raises the question of whether it is morally acceptable to perform. An example of one such morally questionable act is that of killing; a blanket statement of 'Killing is always wrong' as might be suggested by a deontologist will not necessarily be universally accepted, particularly when considering the act of killing an organism such as a parasite or weed. As a rule, the acts I have selected for comparison are those that fall closer to the 'evil' end of the spectrum, but exploring the question of whether or not they remain evil acts when performed in a virtual environment is the purpose of this paper. The acts I have selected for the purposes of my thesis are killing, torture, and destruction, being representative of acts designed to eliminate or damage entities or constructions within the virtual world – in other words, examples of the player employing actions designed to cause direct harm. I have chosen killing because, as noted, it is questionable as to whether it is always wrong to kill in the real world, and also because 'killing' a computer entity is somewhat different than killing a biological creature, and I feel it is important to understand why. Torture is another act where an ethical framework like consequentialism may not regard it as intrinsically wrong, provided there is sufficient justification for the act in that it generally improves the wellbeing of everyone else; this aspect is used as a criticism of the theory, in that it allows for the abject misery of one to ensure the happiness of the many (Dostoevsky 1879). As with killing, torture does not carry the same implications within the virtual worlds of computer games as it does in the real world, but as the purpose of this paper I intend to demonstrate that it is still something that should carry moral weight. Finally, destruction is those acts involving damage to objects within the virtual world, from the destruction of environments to the desecration of virtual corpses. These acts do not have a

clear victim, but are still analogous to real-world destruction, and as such may provide insight into the idea that what we do within video games does not 'count'. Destruction within video games is particularly interesting as an example because there is no clear distinction between the programming that creates pseudo-living entities and that which creates the environment of the game, meaning distinguishing between harm to a computer entity and harm to, for example, a box within that world, must rely upon player perceptions more than the properties of the target itself.

Part 2 – Why simulated actions don't matter.

Why, either as game-players or as society at large, do we not consider the actions a player takes within a game as being morally significant in and of itself? Why do players feel as though they can kill video game entities without it being 'wrong'? As touched upon in the sections outlining the normative theories, actions that lack real-world consequences, or which affect entities not considered to be subject to moral consideration, are not generally considered to be 'wrong'. That is, a player can cheerily kill computer entities in increasingly gory ways without actually committing any direct wrongdoing so far as either society or the player is concerned. Moral guardians may decry the increase of violence in video games, but the argument is based upon whether that violence might spill over into 'real' violence; my interest is in whether the simulated violence can be significant in itself. In this section I will explore two basic reasons why the idea of video-game actions being morally significant may be ignored; firstly the idea that the entities that players are acting against are not things which are subject to moral consideration, and secondly, that players may be relinquishing their moral agency by choosing to play the game in the first place, and thus ceasing to make moral decisions regarding subsequent acts.

Computer Entities are Not Real

One reason that the significance of in-game actions may be dismissed is based upon the idea that computer entities are not real, and the extension of that idea means the actions taken by the player are also not real. In other words, because the targets of the player's actions are not entities that require moral consideration, the actions the player takes towards them do not count as true examples of immoral action, regardless of how similar they may be to real-world actions that would attract moral censure. There are two claims to be examined; the

first that video-game entities cannot be wronged in a moral sense, and the second that actions performed in an unreal environment against unreal targets are not actions with moral weight.

The first of these ideas is that the video-game entities that players kill are not things against which we can commit wrongful acts. If these entities cannot be wronged in a morally relevant sense, they do not deserve moral consideration. If they deserve no moral consideration, then failure to give them moral consideration is not a wrong act, and there can be no moral claim against the player performing such acts. In other words, if an entity lacks an intrinsic moral standing, then moral considerations do not apply to it. I would like to be clear that I am not talking about intrinsic value in the sense that an entity is valued in itself by a person, and that this person's right to self-realisation in a deontological sense spills over to protect those things that give that person pleasure; that is, if entity x is of value to agent y, and y has ethical standing, then there is a duty for agents not to deprive y of x (O'Neill 2001 p.165). I am referring to the strict Kantian sense, in which an entity does or does not possess intrinsic value in and of itself, and that it is an end in itself and possesses ethical standing. The idea of an entity being worthy of consideration because it is important to another entity, while an interesting argument, steps beyond the focus of this paper by reinvolving other players, and so I shall not pursue that line of questioning further.

Does a video-game entity have moral standing? The general view, according to Lori Gruen, is that only humans recognise and respond to such claims of moral standing, and therefore all and only humans make such claims (Gruen 2010). However, defining what exactly it is about humans in particular that makes them, in this view, uniquely capable of being wronged is precarious at best, particularly when the issue of whether animals can be wronged enters the equation. As an example, one criterion might be rationality. Kant was a supporter of this view, claiming that rational beings possess a quality of 'personhood', and thus exist as an end in themselves, and not as a means to be used by others. Non-rational beings, however, possess only a relative value as means (Kant 1785 p. 428). By basing the dividing line upon this criterion, Kant excludes animals from possessing personhood and therefore being more than instrumentally valuable. However, there is a problem. As pointed out by Singer, if only rational beings are subject to consideration, then unborn or very young babies, severely brain damaged individuals and coma patients, all of whom lack rationality, must be regarded as being unworthy of moral consideration (Singer 1993 p.182). As we do not consider them this way in most societies, there must be something else that is granting them a status of consideration. In this case, it is most likely because they are perceived to have either once

had or that they will eventually gain rational ability, rather than because they actually possess the quality in themselves. Alternatively, leading into the next point, there is a sense in which we are obliged to aid those beings that are capable of receiving harm but incapable of avoiding it; essentially, the idea that there can be moral patients as well as moral agents.

Is it fair to include only those creatures capable of higher reasoning and by doing so restrict our moral responsibility to our fellow man alone? Singer asserts that this is speciesist, and follows the lead of Bentham in asserting that what is important is whether the creature can suffer. Singer's interpretation is that the ability to suffer and/or the capacity for happiness is a necessary prerequisite for having interests, and possessing interests is sufficient justification for moral consideration (Singer 1986 p. 221). A rock cannot be made to suffer by any means we could possibly bring to bear upon it, for it lacks the capability. Nothing done to it makes the slightest difference to the rock itself, and suggesting that there is an 'itself' for the rock to have is merely a label. A living creature, particularly one with a sufficiently complex and functional nervous system, does have interests because of its ability to suffer. A mouse would suffer as the result of torture, and thus has an interest in not being tortured. So there is an obligation to give moral consideration to anything capable of perceiving itself to be worse or better off as a result of our actions. But what about those things that are not so capable, such as the aforementioned rock? The problem with opening up the field of moral consideration to those things that lack their own interests is mainly a practical one. If trees are included, for example, does this mean we cannot then cut one down to use? Singer points out it introduces the difficulty of how someone could weigh up the alternatives; the well-being of the tree as opposed to the necessity you wish to use it for (Singer 2001). What takes precedence? Additionally, on what basis could it be said that it matters to a tree whether or not it continues as per the original argument regarding having interests? At the same time, someone who, for example, burns down an uninhabited island when he is finished using it would raise a great feeling of objection in most people at the needless destruction (Midgley 1995 p. 247), even if they could not provide justification for what exactly was wrong about doing so. By contrast, it would seem that there would be very little objection to someone crushing a pebble to powder should the mood take them; the idea of this causing moral concern over the destruction seems laughable. If the targets involved are not capable of suffering, as in the case of video-game entities, then they essentially exist at a similar level to that pebble, for nothing capable of suffering receives harm from their destruction, and like the pebble but unlike the island there is not even a hidden sense of instrumental value propping

up perceptions. The island may be perceived differently because it is seen as possibly being of use, whether or not it actually is, while an easily-replaceable pebble does not carry that same possibility. In either case, the sense of video-game entities as being morally valuable because they are of value to an agent is not the sense in which I am attempting to examine them.

But even if we grant for argument's sake the problematic statement that all physical things are subject to at least some moral consideration, this does not actually solve the problem for video game entities. Unlike rocks, trees, islands and the like, video game entities lack physical existence. What we see on a computer screen is a composite composed of numerous lines of instruction regarding which specific pixels on a screen should be lit up and in what order. When we perceive a computer entity, it is not a real and tiny manikin existing just behind the computer screen, or a projection upon it of something happening elsewhere, but merely a visual representation of the interaction of lines of code. However, it still makes sense to talk about them as individual entities in the same way as we can speak of a cartoon characters in such a manner. But like cartoon characters, even granting them this individual distinction does not escape the fact that they have no real-world physical existence. Because they are constructed of lines of code, destroying their representation does not actually affect them, as running the code again will cause them to pop back into existence as if nothing had happened. Destroying the code is more problematic, as this would end the possibility of return, but has anything beyond a set of instructions actually been destroyed? There seems to be little justification for believing so, any more than backspacing this paragraph destroys anything other than a particular configuration of words.

From the Kantian perspective, there does not seem to be a justified reason for considering video-game entities as being subject to the protection granted by universalised maxims. It becomes meaningless to speak of whether a rule could be universalised if the video-game entities could never be in a position to apply it or be harmed by it, due to lacking rationality and the capacity to suffer harm. As mentioned earlier, there is the additional problem that players are capable of rendering themselves largely invulnerable, and thereby freeing themselves to will any universal maxim that they desire – that is, they can will it that anyone can partake of certain actions in the knowledge that they are the only entity involved that is able to. The alternative Kantian requirement to allow other agents to act according to their own ends also breaks down when the video-game entities lack the intrinsic capacity to even have their own maxims, let alone live according to them. Treating other entities as ends

rather than simply as means becomes impossible when video-game entities do not have their own agenda; when they are created purely to create an experience for the player, then their 'ends' so far as they can be said to have one *is* to act as a means. Kantian deontology operates under the assumption that all of the entities involved are moral agents, and so does not readily apply when the player is the only agent actively involved. Under this approach, then, there seems to be no reason why the player cannot treat a video-game entity in any way that they wish, as they have no particular duty towards the video-game entity other than one they may create for themselves.

From a consequentialist perspective, there are also a number of problems. An action taken within a video game, in normal circumstances, has no direct consequences on real entities outside of the game. In a multiplayer game there is an exception to this general rule, as by interacting with the other player's in-game resources and representations, the first player is exerting some direct influence over the other player's circumstances. However, in a single-player game the player is the only 'real' person involved, and their actions for or against other entities or constructions within the game are only affecting non-real things. As mentioned earlier, it may be that because of this lack of consequence, actions within a video game world are not subject to moral consideration – if it causes no harm to real things, then it isn't bad. Further, as the usual purpose of playing video games is to derive pleasure from them, then if performing these non-harmful acts results in pleasure for the player, they could be considered 'good' acts. A standard objection to act consequentialism is that it absolutely forbids nothing; horrendous acts could be allowed so long as they promise the best overall outcome. However, the response to this objection is that it applies only in horrendous circumstances – where there was much to be gained by the act, such as the saving of innocent lives via an act of torture (Pettit 1993 p.234). In a game-world, this objection doesn't apply; the interesting thing about video-game worlds under this view is that, due to there being no negative consequences to other real things, any act that the player derives pleasure from, and which does not detriment the player's own well-being, is permissible. The caveat with respect to horrendous circumstances is lifted once it is established that there is no harm produced by the act, as the act no longer needs to balance its harm against the good it produces.

Can someone still perform an evil act when the target suffers no harm? It would seem that a consequentialist must say 'no'. Susan Anderson argues that for an act to be evil, it must cause harm to at least one other person, or allow harm to be caused that could have been

prevented without placing the preventer in danger (Anderson 1990 p. 52). Anderson does make a distinction between considering something 'evil' and considering it merely 'bad', suggesting that an act which falls within the domain of what could be considered 'normal' behaviour might be thought of as 'bad' while one that steps outside those bounds would be 'evil'(Anderson p.51). Anderson's example is the difference between a homeowner stabbing a robber who has killed the homeowner's child, which would be considered bad but probably not evil, and someone who wishes to wipe out a particular group because one member of it offended him, which would be evil. Anderson concludes that what appears to make the difference is whether we can imagine a 'normal' person doing it, and the interpretation is at least partially based on the motives of the person performing the act (p. 51). Nevertheless, it is the consequences of the action that ultimately categorises it as either 'bad' or 'evil', with the motivation serving only to determine in which of those categories it specifically fits.

Video game entities are not by any stretch of the imagination human, nor do they have the capability of becoming so, at least with current technology levels. They are also not capable of suffering, as they lack any internal mental state with which to suffer. Since they lack the ability to suffer they cannot actually experience detriment from being thwarted in their interests – doubly so in that it is difficult to claim that they actually have interests at all. Video game entities do not, therefore, possess the relevant characteristics that would afford them anything like the same moral status as we afford to animals. The approach with video games seems to be that because they are 'just a game', the actions only matter if there are real-world consequences, such as the aforementioned arguments regarding whether video games result in increased real life violence. If the target within a game suffers no harm, then performing actions to 'harm' it are permissible, and only cause trouble if those same actions are taken from within the video-game context and applied to the real world. However, I would argue that this misses that the player is still performing the action, and that just because it is performed in simulation does not excuse it from moral consideration. It is this argument that I will be addressing in part 3 of my thesis.

Moral Agency

An alternative reason for the willingness of players to engage in morally questionable acts within games is that they may be relinquishing their moral agency. Rather than directly applying moral reasoning, they defer to that presented to them, either within the context of the game or at a higher level via the tacit approval of the game within society. The first level

can be summed up as follows: it is built into the game that the player can or should do X, therefore X must be permissible. This level sets the definition of morality within the game as being based upon the intentions of the game-developer. The second level is the idea that if there was something truly wrong with doing X within a game, society would not allow such a game to exist. This level uses the approval or disapproval of society as the final arbiter of morality within the game, and by extension the morality of the actions of the player engaged with it. At both levels, the player's own consideration of values is replaced or superseded by those of supplied by external sources, with or without the player's conscious agreement, and indeed it is this lack of conscious consideration of the morality of the circumstances that is the focus of my argument in this section.

Beginning with the first level, the concept of a morally questionable act being an intrinsic part of the way the game works can be further divided into three basic categories: those acts which the player is forced to undertake if they wish to continue the game, those acts where the player has a choice within the game about whether or not to perform that action and where the ability to choose is a mechanic built into the game, and those acts which the player performs by exploiting the ability to perform them but which are not a central game mechanic. I will refer to the three categories as Forced, Choice and Exploit acts respectively.

Forced acts are those acts which are specifically part of what it means to play the game; the player cannot progress the game without performing them and in most cases could not be said to be playing the game at all if they do not. An example of such an act would be the shooting of enemies in a First Person Shooter (FPS) game; it is part of the definition of what the game is that the shooting of enemies is a basic mechanic, and accounts for the majority of possible actions within the game world. It is therefore not possible to play such a game without shooting, hence the Forced act. A slight variation occurs in those games where a questionable moral activity is required to progress the game, but where that act is not itself part of the game's underlying mechanic. That is, in a game where killing enemies is a base mechanic, killing non-hostile entities to advance is stepping outside of the original premise. An example would be the game God of War III(Asmussen 2010), where the player comes across a video-game entity begging for freedom from a bramble cage, offering a powerful weapon in exchange. Rather than attempting to honour the bargain, the player cannot progress without burning both cage and prisoner, despite the entity's repeated pleas to spare him. What makes this particular killing stand out in a game revolving around brutal slaughter is that this entity is not hostile, and is willing to reward the player for their aid, but no option

for sparing him is provided. The killing of non-combatants is not part of what it means to be a fighting game, as there is at least the expectation that the opponents will be aggressive towards the player; but rather is an addition that forces the player into acts they may not necessarily agree with.

The important point to consider in the case of Forced acts is that the player does in fact have a choice regarding whether or not to perform them, but choice exists outside of the context of the game. Although the player has no option to avoid performing Forced acts within the game, there is still a choice being made; that of actually playing the game. The decision to shoot and kill designated enemies within a shooting game is made before the player is ever presented with an enemy, when the player decides that this is the kind of game they are willing to play, and it is at this point that I believe the player is choosing to relinquish their moral agency. By choosing to play the game, the player makes one moral decision, which they may not even recognise as being a moral decision, and that is that they are willing to adhere to the morality presented within the game world. As a parallel, a similar moral decision is made by anyone participating in a contact sport; by entering the ring, a boxer is accepting that within the ring in is expected of them to attempt harm upon their opponent, albeit within carefully crafted restrictions. After that decisive point, the player is performing the behaviour expected of them within the game, the standard of which is set by the game's designers, and despite the player being forced to perform acts that they may not wish to, such as the killing of the non-hostile entity mentioned above, the option to simply put down the game controller and stop playing the game no longer appears to be a viable choice. Why is this? By choosing to play the game, the player has entered into an agreement with the game's developer, that the player will perform the actions required of them and in return the game will provide them with rewards, either basic entertainment or a sense of accomplishment. The basic form of influence is one of operant conditioning; the player is rewarded for certain in-game actions, and punished for others, until the player seeks to perform those actions resulting in reward voluntarily. The rewards do not have to be particularly large in order to keep people playing; operant conditioning kicks in so long as the rewards are sufficiently connected to the player's actions (Portnow and Floyd 2010). In other words, so long as there remains the perception that their reward will be provided if they just keep going, the player remains receptive to performing the forced acts they object to rather than ceasing play. The standard practice of gameplay that is enforced is that of seeking objectives and completing them, regardless of what those objectives may be.

There is an strong parallel with Milgram's famous experiment on obedience (Milgram 1963), wherein all that was required for the participants to continue administering electric shocks was the perception that an authority figure was telling them that they had agreed to participate, and therefore must continue. The participants indicated their discomfort with the experiment, but the majority continued regardless; those who protested were persuaded to continue by simply being told to, without any form of physical coercion or threat. In the same way, acceptance of the game's terms allows the mere suggestion within game of the required act to be sufficient to cause the payer to perform it. Essentially, the player is deferring their moral agency to the scenario presented within the game; the game, and by extension the developers, becomes the player's moral guide as to what actions are required and forbidden. A striking example of this tendency being deliberately revealed occurs towards the end of the game of Bioshock (Hellquist and Levine 2007). Throughout the game, the player performs the actions a radio voice directs them to do, despite the voice belonging to a character the player has never met. The directions are each time phrased as a request, and portrayed as being issued with the player's best interests in mind. However, due to the mechanics of the game, these directed actions are Forced actions; the player cannot progress unless they perform them. Because the requests serve as instructions to the player as to the objectives they need to achieve in order to advance, the player has little reason to question them, but there is a hidden side to them. The sinister nature of automatically adhering to the instructions of this disembodied voice is revealed in a single incident that takes place towards the end of the game, where upon encountering the apparent primary antagonist, the player is ordered by that entity to kill him. The player may balk at this deliberate murder, as the entity in question is unarmed and makes no move to harm the player, but at this point the player loses direct control of their in-game representation and is forced by the game to rather brutally beat the human-looking entity to death, in a highly disturbing scene. This succinctly demonstrates the player's surrender of moral agency; throughout the game they passively fulfilled the requests of the voice, meaning that they never had direct control of their actions to begin with. The revelation that the player character had no choice in the matter mirrors the player's inability to perform actions contrary to what they had been requested to do, but also serves as a reminder that the player had at no point along the way refused to perform said actions at all. In the same manner as the Milgram experiment, an authority figure, in this case the instructions presented via the game itself, tells the player what is required of them, and the player obeys; otherwise they are not fulfilling their end of the bargain they have agreed to by participating in the game in the first place.

If the player's actions are Forced acts, and therefore either directly part of what it means to play the game or actions required of them by the designers, are they responsible for any actions they perform within the game after choosing to play it? If the morally questionable acts the player is tacitly agreeing to perform are deliberately inserted by the designers, then isn't the moral impetus on the designers to exclude morally questionable content from their games? There are links to the Euthyphro (Plato) dilemma once again, as discussed under divine command theory; if the developer is indeed the one supplying the morality of the game-world, then it is possible that whatever morality they insert into the game defines what is good within the context of that game. The player must adhere to the morality presented by the developers, much as if they were the deity of the game-world, but does this then mean that it is up to the developers to ensure the morality they present is really the 'good' kind? This is the basic idea behind censorship and the Code of Classification; if a game is deemed to contain unsuitable content, then it is either outright banned or subject to a restricted classification. If the player cannot access such a game, the question of whether or not they agree or can agree to participate in the morally questionable acts within it is entirely removed from consideration.

But is the player also responsible for their actions within the game? A divine-command theorist is forced to say no; morality comes from the authoritative source, and so as long as the player is adhering to the strictures of that authority they cannot ever be doing wrong. A problem with this idea comes from the possibility that the morality enforced by that authority is questionable in itself. Chiefly, the problem is where does that authority gain its own morality? Realistically, the game-developer, having to adhere to the laws of their country, must themselves bow to the ideas of morality dictated by the classification boards, who themselves presumably develop it from the 'normal' standards of acceptability amongst the populace. As discussed earlier, the act of shooting an enemy is part of what it means to play a first-person shooter game; it is therefore a 'normal' act in the context of that game.

A real-world parallel would be that of a soldier ordered to kill an enemy combatant, and another ordered to kill a civilian. In the first case, by agreeing to become a soldier, the individual in question has already given his assent to following the orders of his superiors; it is part of what it means to be a soldier (assuming they are a combatant) to follow orders to kill the enemy. By refusing to fight, the soldier is not fulfilling the conditions of their agreement to be a soldier. However, a soldier ordered to kill a civilian is being asked to step outside the boundaries of what he signed up for, and, like the example from God of War III,

is being asked to perform a task that is not a direct consequence of the type of job he is doing. According to part 2, article 8 of the International Humanitarian Law treaty, the fact that a defendant acted in accordance with the orders of their superior when performing what was deemed to be a war crime is not sufficient to free them from responsibility, although it can be taken as a mitigating factor (ICRC 1945). In this case, the soldier has a duty to refuse to participate in criminal orders, and if he does participate then he is morally culpable for that action. Essentially, the act of following orders to kill enemy combatants is part of what it means to agree to be a soldier, while the instruction to kill civilians is a deliberate addition to that meaning that steps outside the requirements for being a soldier. In the same sense, a game where the player shoots enemies adheres to the genre requirements for a first-person shooter, but requiring the player to shoot non-combatants is not part of the genre. So it appears the distinction between the Forced acts that are intrinsic to the genre of game and the Forced acts that are deliberate choices of the designers is an important one – by analogy, the player would not be deemed responsible for their actions in the first instance but would be in the second. Therefore the question remains: on what basis do we define some in-game acts as acceptable, such as shooting enemies in a first-person shooter, while similar actions with a different target are condemned, such as killing children within a game? I will return to the idea of a double standard in a part 3.

But what about the other two categories I defined at the beginning of this section, Choice and Exploit? In the case of Exploit acts, the player is deliberately choosing to perform an act that was not required or even intended by the developer, and in many cases goes directly against the intentions of the developer. In this case, the capability to perform the actions is a part of the game, but the expectation the player will do so is not. The player is not in this case performing these acts because they are required to, and indeed are subverting the stated goal of the game by doing so. Because of this, it is entirely their own moral decision to perform the act, and they are not receiving permission from authority to do so. In this sense, they are reclaiming their moral agency from the game, because they are making their own decision about what it is right to do in the circumstances. So in any instance of a player performing an Exploit act, the morality of the game-world is not what is directing the player's decisions; they are adhering only to their own sense of morality once again. Why then do players feel it is acceptable to perform violent actions not intended by the developer within the game? If they have reclaimed their agency, the responsibility is once again upon the player, not the

developer, and we are forced to return to the possibility that it is a case of the player not believing that their actions actually have moral ramifications due to their simulated nature.

The third category, that of Choice acts, encompasses those games where there are two or more morality-based options for dealing with particular scenarios within the game. This includes games with an intrinsic morality system involving acts defined in-game as good or evil, as well as those where the player can simply choose not to perform morally questionable acts and still progress in the game, but where the option to perform those acts is deliberately included within the game. Like the Forced acts, in Choice acts the options are still defined by what the developer gives the option for the player to do, but unlike the Forced acts, actual decisions are made by the player beyond whether to play or not. The existence of this third category acts as an intermediary between the Forced acts where the player must act, and the Exploit acts where the player might act; it is the situation where the player is directly made aware that there is a moral decision to be made, so they must act, but due to the choice it is their decision as to what that act should actually be. Therefore, like the Exploit acts, the moral decision is upon the player; they retain moral agency. However limited their choices are in the situation, they are still responsible for deciding that one action is more appropriate than the other.

It seems, then, that the player does not actually lack agency, and so this lack is not the cause of their actions within games not being considered to count in a moral sense. But there is still the possibility of an unnoticed abrogation of agency on the part of the player; the game-world is presented to the player in a manner that clearly separates it from the real-world, and it may be that this causes the player to assume those presenting it to them have the authority sufficient to defer to. In other words, the player would not be able to play the game if it was not alright to do so, so their actions within the game are the moral responsibility of the developers. This is the view that regardless of whether the acts are Forced, Exploit or Choice, the fact that the game which contains them is permitted to be sold makes it permitted to engage in those acts. If it was bad, it wouldn't be allowed; it is allowed, therefore it can't be bad.

This, I think, may be the crux of the matter. The key to a player's lack of a sense of responsibility is the presentation of situations in a manner that removes that sense of responsibility. In other words, it consists of cases where acts are not deemed to have moral weight because their recipients are in some way deemed not to count in moral terms, or at

least that actions towards them lack the same weight that might ordinarily apply. An example related to video games can be found in the work entitled 'Helena' by Danish artist Marco Evaristti (2000), consisting of ten blenders containing live goldfish, where visitors to the exhibit were invited to activate a blender if they so wished. The artist's stated intention was to get visitors to consider the ethical implications of doing so, but several goldfish were blended anyway, suggesting that the goldfish were not considered to count for enough to trigger the contemplation of their status (Longstaff 2003). Alternatively, and perhaps more importantly, it is possible that at least some of the visitors sincerely believed that the blender would not start if they pushed the button, because how could they be 'allowed' to blend goldfish in public? The problem that this raises is once again one of abrogation of agency – why did they press the button, even if they thought nothing would happen? The suggestion is that the visitors were ceding their moral responsibility to the artist; if something bad happened, it was because the artist had created the situation where it was a permitted option.

More to the point, however, is the question of whether the artist was committing a moral transgression by setting up the exhibit in the first place; in Kantian terms, he was treating the goldfish as a means rather than an ends. The way this example relates to video games is that it sets up a scenario engineered by another party wherein the visitor can choose to participate or not, but where the 'blame' for the visitor's choice of action does not seem to reside in entirely in the visitor. The situation is set-up in a way that removes responsibility, providing the opportunity to act and inviting the visitor to proceed without reprisal. But surely the visitor carries the responsibility of actually committing the act, if they are acting free of coercion? Actions committed within a game-world are not usually considered the same way; the player might be responsible for the act, but the act is not real. But this line is blurred when it comes to games that portray, with increasing realism, actual humans as the designated enemy. The developer may be responsible for portraying the actions in a way that suggests to the player there is no moral weight, but this does not exclude the player from accepting responsibility for their actions.

In summary, the player may consider the actions they take within video games as being of little or no moral significance, based upon the lack of consequences to entities capable of experiencing harm, the accepted nature of the game in society, and the belief that if it were wrong they would not be permitted to do it. I will examine the reasons why this may not be enough to dismiss actions taken within simulations from moral consideration in the next section.

Part 3 – Why Simulated actions matter

Can refraining from causing 'harm' to video-game entities be justified? It appears to be impossible to justify based on their ability to suffer from it, via a consequentialist approach, as at the current level of technology it is simply not the case that video-game entities have any capability of actually suffering. Similarly, it does not appear possible to justify not harming video-game entities on the basis of having a duty towards them, as it appears they are not things towards which the player can have a duty. However, this does not escape the problem that the player is engaged in an activity which simulates the production of suffering in other entities. In other words, it might be true that video game entities demand no consideration of their moral rights, but is this enough to excuse behaviour that would violate those rights if they actually had them? I would argue that the issue is less about whether or not a computer entity possesses the necessity for moral consideration, but rather that something has gone wrong with our moral system if we fail to apply such consideration anyway. Ayn Rand believed an individual owes nothing to their fellow man, so for her other people were the equivalent of the video game entities – they cannot make moral claims upon you and their needs or lack thereof should not be taken into account when deciding a course of action (Berliner 1995 p. 344-345). According to this view, it is a person's desire rather than the need of the other that should dictate what action they perform; a person can choose to be magnanimous so long as it does not conflict with their own self-interest. Midgley argues that we do still have such a duty to others, in the sense that it is part of what it means to have a duty to ourselves to behave in an appropriate manner (Midgley 1995 p. 101). It does not matter whether the things we interact with have the capacity to perceive harm, nor does it matter if we do not owe them any consideration or if they are worthless to us. We are obliged to give them consideration not on their behalf, but on our own, as beings capable of moral feeling.

The problem with the idea that the immorality of an action can be negated if the target is something that does not suffer harm, or is not capable of acting with agency, is that it places the qualification of the act's morality on the target of the act rather than on the person performing it. In other words, performing a certain act upon a person would be considered evil, but performing the same act upon something considered morally irrelevant would not be. There seems to be a kind of double standard, and not just between 'real' entities and video-game versions. In many games, especially those known as 'sandbox' games such as

Skyrim (Howard 2012), the player is able to kill indiscriminately should they so desire. However, this freedom does not extend across all entities; children in Skyrim are absolutely invulnerable. Why should this be so? If killing 'adult' entities within Skyrim is allowable if not necessarily approved of, then why is the capability to kill child versions of those same entities withheld from the player? The only explanation that occurs to me is that society considers it wrong for a player to kill even something that is merely representative of a child; but if this act is wrong to perform even in simulation then why is killing an adult warrior in the game not regarded in the same way?

A relevant concept when considering this split is that of moral luck. Consider the scenario: Alice drives home while heavily under the influence, but by chance avoids hitting anyone. Bob also drives home under the influence, but by chance runs over someone on the way. Both Alice and Bob have performed the same action, but a change in circumstances means that Alice has caused no harm while Bob has. Has Alice still committed an immoral act? Alice's actions are more likely to result in causing harm than other options that might be available to her, but in terms of results they did not actually cause any harm. If she could know ahead of time that she was not going to hit anyone, would that free her to drive drunk if she so wished? What if, unknown to Alice, she was actually driving a very realistic simulation of her car? The fact she doesn't hit anyone in the simulated version is still not caused by any action Alice herself took, but purely on the circumstances she finds herself in. Is she still responsible for committing what would be an immoral act had she been driving a real car? Is there any moral difference? An objection to this comparison rests on the fact that Alice would believe herself to be driving her real car and therefore acting in real life in both scenarios, while a game-player knows that what they are doing is not real. But this simply becomes another example of Alice knowing ahead of time that she wasn't going to hit anyone; does this imply that no action can be immoral if the agent believes that no harm will result from it? Neither consequentialist nor deontological approaches would agree with this view; a consequentialist would object that it implies the actual outcome doesn't matter so long as the agent holds the belief, while a deontologist would object to the wrongness of actions being based upon the state of mind of the agent performing them rather than the nature of the action itself. Going back to video-games, actions taken within the game have no chance of resulting in harm to another real person, but they are still performing the kinds of acts that would cause harm if there really were a real person on the receiving end. In other words, the simulations allow the player to perform actions they would be prevented from

performing in real life, based upon the reasoning that the simulated world is not real, and so neither are the acts taken within it.

My concern with this kind of justification is that just because an act is performed in a simulated situation does not mean that the act is not 'really' being performed. I am not claiming that actors in movies are morally culpable for pretending to strangle their co-stars when on film; the key distinction in that case is that they are 'pretending'. An actor playing the part, unless they are an extreme method-actor or mentally unbalanced, do not believe at any point that they are really intending to do what they are shown to be doing; their intent is not to perform the act, but to be seen to perform the act. A critic might argue that in order to portray the act they must 'really' being doing it in some way, but this ignores such factors as pulled punches and similar methods, which allow the actor to appear to harm their colleague while in reality trying their best to ensure no harm is caused. In the case of video games, it is different. The player knows that the world they are interacting with is not real, and they may be pretending to be the particular character they are playing, but when they perform an action they are intending to perform exactly that action. They do not merely pretend to kill a video-game entity for the benefit of the camera; they actually end its existence. A critic might argue that they are pretending to kill a real thing that is represented by the simulated one, and as such they are still pretending to perform the act, but that is possibly an even worse scenario than if they were merely trying to kill the computer entity. Such a thing would imply that a player does on some level use the game world as a substitute for performing such acts in the real world, which, if true, is a very troubling concept. The important point is that while the world and situation the player inhabits and interacts with are 'pretend', i.e. a simulation, the player is performing real acts within that situation.

If the actions of the player in the video-game are still real actions and are therefore in need of moral interpretation, but the targets of those actions are not entities which demand moral consideration, then there needs to be some other basis by which the morality of the situation can be determined. It seems that the burden rests upon the player themselves, for two reasons, both having to do with virtue ethics. The first is that the player should care about entities in order to practice the virtue of caring, and thus improve it in themselves. This is the idea that the player becomes better as a person if they practice, even in simulation, those virtues required of them as a human being, and this can be aided by not trivialising the actions they take within the game world. The second is that they should act in a way that practices their virtue as a player, which brings with it the opportunity for the developers to

instil virtue in the player by careful attention to what it means to be a 'good' player of their game.

Why should players care about video-game entities? The short answer is because such entities are analogies for similar beings in the real world, and are presented as such to the player. That is, entities within games appear, act and react as if they could be real things, so when the player sees them acting in fear or pain, the player should react as if the entities really were in distress. If they do not experience such a response, then they are failing to practice compassion. This can be demonstrated through the progression between the kinds of things people feel responsibility towards in the real world. People will generally still feel a responsibility towards coma patients, even ones effectively brain-dead. If this is a feeling instilled in us because we know the coma patient was at one point capable of rational thought, then the fact we still have this feeling seems to be a case where we are displacing the actions we prescribe in one case onto another case we deem similar – in other words, we are transferring our sense of compassion. Progressing from coma-patients, we come to corpses. Dead humans in most cultures are treated with a certain degree of respect, regardless of whether or not they were known to the person when they were alive, and abuses of bodies have led to criminal charges, such as the reported incident of US soldiers urinating on Taliban corpses (Martinez 2012). This could be attributed to sensitivity towards the feelings of the deceased person's loved ones rather than residual respect for the dead person themselves, in the case of strangers, but that relies upon someone having a stronger feeling of respect towards a live person that may only hypothetically exist, than to a dead one lying in front of them. In either case, the agent refrains from causing harm to something that cannot itself suffer based on caring for someone they have no direct connection to; they are acting out of compassion.

Why is this important? As discussed in the section on virtue ethics, Aristotle thought that a good person was one who exhibited the features of human excellence, specifically the virtues, and that by practicing the virtues they could be instilled in the agent's character. Therefore, in situations where compassion can be employed, such as in video-games, it should be, or the agent in question is failing at the task of self-realisation. The games are an opportunity for the player to exercise the faculties which make them a good human; by deliberately choosing ends which promote the use of those faculties to the extent the player possesses them, they can develop themselves as moral beings (Downie and Telfer 1969 p.74). Naturally, this implies that a player should choose to play non-violent games by preference, but realistically

this is unlikely to become universally popular so long as the tendency towards violent behaviour exists in humanity. The key then is to be selective as to the kind of violence that is required in the game, and this is where the virtue required of a good player can be utilised. As explained by Homer in the worlds of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, there is the sense in which virtue or excellence is the set of skills or aptitudes that enables an agent to function successfully in their social role (Barney 2011); Aristotle held a similar view, but thought that human excellence was of paramount importance. Just as a soldier has additional requirements that may conflict with those which make a good human, it is possible that a player has requirements for virtue as a player that similarly stand in opposition. As discussed, in a first-person shooter game, it is part of what it means to play the game that the player is required to shoot enemies. It would seem then that the factors that make a 'good' player are whatever the game requires of them, much as with the divine command theory approach. From this, then, it is possible to recombine the concept of a good person with a good player by setting in place in each game the ability to avoid immoral action. That is, unlike the God of War III example used earlier, wherein the player was forced to brutally kill an entity that was peaceful towards them, it should always be possible for the player to avoid causing harm to those who offer them no harm in return, and therefore allow them to practice virtuous behaviour as human beings.

Conclusion

From this exploration, I have established that there does not seem to be a justification for treating video-game entities as morally relevant beings for their own sake, from the perspective of either consequentialism or deontology. However, there is an opportunity for players to develop their own moral character by ensuring that they treat video-game entities in such a manner anyway, and it is to this that game-developers should refer as a guide to the actions they should require of a player within their games.

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